

## Special Needs Drum Circles

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This was a wonderful drum circle to celebrate Earth Day at Honeymoon Island.

The beauty of it was that it was a blend of our general community, and a special needs group, all together playing. We had a blast being up on the big stage drumming out some great rhythms, and engaging a huge crowd to [join](#) in with us.

A key part of the intent of groups that are oriented toward those with physical and/or mental restrictions is finding ways to bring them into general society as much as possible. It has been my experience that drum circles are an excellent path to this goal. This is the kind of work I believe I was put on this earth to do. Working with special needs individually, or in groups touches my heart very deeply, especially when I get home and have some time to reflect on the experience.



With this particular group, after a few drum circles at their facility, I invited them to a public drum circle at a cafe where I was hosting a weekly drum circle. They were comfortable drumming with me at that point, and it worked out great. Months later, when I was asked to host an Earth Day drum circle show on the big stage, I asked the staff and them if they would like to drum at this event. They jumped at the chance. Sure it was a little risky, but that's what life is about. Taking chances. We played for over an hour and a half, the crowd didn't want us to stop, two encores and booked for 45 minutes, but it was going so well the organizers happened in less than 6 months. It just kind of all fell together.

special needs group playing with the general public. The group was thrilled that they were just seen as regular people, and not as "special".

I have no medical [degree](#) in music therapy. However I do have extensive drumming to children & adults with ADHD, Down Syndrome, Cerebral Palsy, and Injured Individuals, and more. If you live around St. Louis, please contact me about a drumming program. No contracts, one lesson at a time.

For more information on special needs groups, and people with disabilities below. Detailed information, and my experiences may help you.



**I think the most difficult, yet the most satisfying work I can do as a drum circle facilitator, host, or a drumming teacher, is special needs drum circles. Whether it's with one child, a lot of children, or groups of adults with developmental or learning disabilities.**

**Hand drumming reaches people on so many deep levels, and of course me as well. This kind of work touches me very deeply. Emotionally, it just tugs at my heart. And reaches me on such a deep personal level that I can't even describe the feeling and how much I am affected by it. Especially afterwards when I sort of debrief myself, and reflect on things for an hour or two.**

**I think about what they enjoyed the most, what worked well, what fell flat, what I just learned from the session, and from them. Each time I come away with something new. Especially when I reflect on it at night, and even into the next day. When I am home, I have some time to realize some of the ways it has affected me. It really surprised me when I first worked with a group such as this how deeply I was touched by working with them, and how much they all benefited from it. That first time, I just went there to help everyone drum some, and have fun together at a holiday party. I came home profoundly affected.**



For the most part I found all I needed to do fundamentally, is just start out rhythms like I usually do, and let the music go where it goes. Maybe add in a few games or fun things people can do just be spontaneous and have fun with. It is more of a challenge to facilitate though the music. I knew that with some conditions, you needed to speak slowly and clearly. To be very patient and give people a chance to work into the present time. The repetition of the drum beat rhythm allows that, even if their condition forces them to live ten seconds in the past, they can catch up. I noticed the social changes in the group positively improve as well.

Some administrators love the drum circle environment. They have told me that it's rare for the parents and patients to have a fun activity they can do together. This is something they rarely get to do. Just to have some fun and improvise without worry and have a good time...together...and without it feeling a little uncomfortable. Because when you drum, even with physical, or mental conditions, all you think about is drumming.





I think the most current politically correct term now is “special needs”, it was learning disabilities last year, some may even remember the term mental retardation. I don’t see disabilities in people. I see abilities. I feel it is wrong to try and categorize people like this. One administrator explained to me that most of the people in his group had an IQ of below 70, or problems with adapting, and/or socializing. The average IQ for a person is 100, measured by tests. Most of us have taken one at some time or another. The Wechsler test is one of them.

You just need to very patient, caring, and compassionate, while having fun. More often than not, you will need to modify your approach when working with special needs a little bit. Both with the drumming, and, more importantly, the rapport you build with them. I like to focus more on the individual relationships with each person. Because if they like you, and enjoy hanging out and drumming with you, that’s the goal I have in mind. We are just regular people having a good time. Having fun as a group, is my goal to help empower them.

If you are having fun, they can see it, feel it, and they begin to have fun also. You need to be able to hold the support beat solid for them sometimes. Especially, at a first drum circle session. Later on, you can lay back here and there. Even let someone else start out a beat, and support it. It may work, it may fall to pieces. If you have a fun personality, and something goes flat, you can just joke about it. “Oops, my fault. Let’s start a new rhythm up.”



One important thing to keep in mind as explained to me by a neurologist was that most of the patients, regardless of their individual condition, one thing most all of them have in common, is that they are essentially normal, intelligent, highly functional people. They just live five, or ten seconds in the past. I didn't know that.

This is why drumming can be so effective. The repetitive nature of a drum beat makes it easy, and comfortable for them to catch up, or find their place in the beat, and feel normal for a change. Verbal communication is the same. This is a little trickier obviously. You need to speak clearly, and slowly. I speak as little as possible with short sentences, and facilitate through the music more, because of this. I usually speak only at the beginning, or end of a musical piece.

I always have my radar up for a non-verbal cue from someone. I do use hand and arm gestures to get everyone's attention in the center of the circle if I need to. But I still facilitate from the edge of the circle, like I always do. We're there to have fun and drum, not to talk. If I do need to explain something, I use photos, or speak very clearly, choose my words carefully, and talk just a tad slower than I normally would.

Memory capacity can be more limited with some of these participants.

A few things I have learned, is just because someone may appear to be not having fun, or may have their head down, it does not necessarily mean they are not into it. Many people in these groups mask their feelings, so I need to be aware of that before I subtly try to address it with a cool percussion gadget from my gig bag. Bored, scared, joyful, digging it, a happy or sad expression, can be easily misinterpreted.

Sometimes a person will have a bored look on their face, but in reality they might be having a ball. I've seen this, and I can't address it in front of the group because it might embarrass them. At the end of a circle this guy comes up to me and says, "I had a wonderful time, thanks for just letting me be me." The next drum circle he did the same thing, but eventually the rhythms got him to play on his own. He played when he was ready to play.



I like to begin sometimes with a gong that I keep in my gig bag. It's about 14 inches wide. I use a soft mallet, and walk around the interior of the circle and let each person bang the gong once, or twice if they don't get a good gong on it. (If they want to.) Usually it's smiles from ear to ear every time. Very few have ever turned it down. It's a fun way to begin, and develop a rapport with each person, and it gives you a chance to see their individual hand coordination a little bit. Try to think up fun ideas like that.

I find the simplest heartbeat rhythm seems to be a good way to begin the drumming, or the "We Will Rock You" beat again. I start it out very slowly, hold it steady, & let them play whatever they want. Whatever feels natural to them. We will let the rhythm go wherever it feels it wants to go, just like at a regular drum circle. They may just want me to hold it slow and steady, or ramp it up and play fast and exciting. They may just want to enjoy a good sounding groove for awhile. You don't really know, until you get there.

But you can prepare a little bit. You can sense what a group wants to do, after you have worked with these populations for a while. Especially, in a very short time, you can assess the group's skill level. I just go with it. With the slower rhythms the time seems to just fly by, and I hardly ever get even half way through my set list. The amount of time becomes a non-issue to everyone, and they all keep happily busy. The most simple heartbeat rhythm will do this if played for more than 10 minutes at the same tempo and volume level. We play lots of other fun rhythms, and have many different endings for them. Anticipating the end of what a rhythm will be as you are playing it, is sometimes fun. So during almost every drum circle, I have 4 or 5 different endings I like to use during the drumming session.

I sometimes just say, "A great rhythm needs a great ending to it." So then I will show whatever it is to them, (1 or 2 bars or so) then I ask to please do it with me a couple of times, like 6 times over so everyone has it. Then we just play a rhythm for 10 minutes or so and I count them down to do that big ending, that we planned.

There is a traditional drum phrase break that signals an upcoming change or ending at a drum circle. That one works great, but is a bit more complex one. Bum Ba DumDum, Ba Dum Dum BaDa. (pause) Boom!

A Latin drum break works well also. Or make something up, as a nice ending to a good jam.

One cool ending I like to use with these groups also, is to have everyone play 9 equal up tempo tones, and then two big bass notes. Then repeat it like 10 times, and I count them down as we go. 4-3-2-1- oooooo B B, oooooo B B and etc. Or try this one - five tones, then 3 bass notes. ooooo BBB, repeat.

When you feel the group has come to the ending, or attention span of a rhythm is ending, try slowing and quieting the rhythm down over a 30 second period...then play slower and slower, until the rhythm ends in super slow motion. Like the Six Million Dollar Man or something. Like one of those old vinyl records slowing down after you unplugged it. Remember those? A rumble after that is always good.

Obviously rumbles are always good. I like to let members of the group get to do the ending rumble. Usually it's whoever raises their hand when I ask, "Who wants to end the rhythm?" Then they get a turn ending a rhythm. I have a magic wand I made up for that. It has colorful ribbons on it. They can wave it around and direct the volume, direction, and so on. A couple of minutes is good on that one. Let each of them that want to direct rumbles so they each get a chance to do it. For some this is the first time they ever get to be a leader. It helps to empower them, and build self esteem.





I let them try out unique percussion items periodically, by pulling them out, demonstrating how they work, and asking between jams, "Who would like to try this one out?" I just let them have fun. But I do go in with a prepared set list program. Which is usually changed all around depending on the group vibe I'm feeling. You can tell if a particular rhythm is working, or not feeling right. So can they. I laugh it off, so do they, and we start another one.

You don't even really need to show people what a rumble is, when they have a drum in their lap. They can figure it out instinctively when you do it, and telegraph it a little at the end of a rhythm. That's part of the fun. Figuring things out on your own. It gives you a better feeling of self accomplishment.

Everything for them is focused on their disability, and that has to get very frustrating for them, so they can use something for an outlet. Drumming is a fun way that they can express their feelings, that will build their confidence. A drum circle? You should see their eyes light up.

But back to rumbles. Sometimes to teach a rumble easily to everyone, I say ok here are two rules. If I put my hands in the air you can play as fast and as loud as you like. When my hands come down you stop. Then I show them a lot of variations they can try, and mention it is ok if you think up your own ways to direct the rumble endings.

It's nice if you can speak to administrators first and ask them questions about their vision, and how they would like things to go. It isn't always possible. Do they want to seat everyone, or start exactly at a given time? What are some of the medical conditions? Are there any in wheelchairs? (Frame drums or tambourines, shakers and bells seem to work well for them.) What is it they hope to see, achieve? Are there potentially any people that might need extra attention, or need the assistance of the staff? Some of these facilities only have one recreation director, and there is no extra staff available.

I research the mission statement; get an idea of who they are from their website always first thing, just like with any other group I work with. Sometimes that is all the information I've had to go on. It happens.

I try to brief the staff before the start about them intervening. I ask them to let me do the crowd control. Do please join in as yourself and please don't try to show anyone how to do it, or what to do with it. I get this sometimes, with staff who mean well. But please don't. The reason is, they sometimes get in there and want to demonstrate to a person how to do this or that. That's not good. It embarrasses them, or worse.

At one special needs group gig, I didn't know anybody there, and had no access to talk to the staff beforehand. All of a sudden people are arriving in droves. Parents, family, and patients all mixed in together. To be honest, a few people I could recognize had certain conditions, but I really had no idea who was a patient, and who were family members? What should I do with this one? So I had to toss my list right out, and improvise. Sometimes improvising is the most fun. Just play or do whatever feels right at the time. Rarely do I end up doing what I planned the night before. And I try not being afraid to do something I might feel is risky. I wear a samba whistle just in case, and demonstrate it in the beginning, to imprint the meaning of it in case things go chaotic at a later part. But I usually don't need it. (Unless I forget to bring it of course.)

The drum circle went great and everyone loved it. The patients got to interact with their family members, and do something fun and positive together. This is pretty rare for some families with special needs family members. Later the staff told me they had three patients that have never even left the housing building before, for any activities. Period. The staff







Many of you already know this, but there is something called entrainment (not entertainment) that can happen to one individual or to an entire group. This occurs when the brain synchronizes to an external stimulus, such as the drum beat. This can be very therapeutic and, while it can happen to anyone or any group, it has a much more significant impact on those with special needs.

A few different medical doctors have explained to me that with most conditions, for example, Down Syndrome patients. They do indeed live a few seconds, to a few minutes in the past. So I just need to allow time for them to catch up. Imagine if you lived a few seconds in the past, and just couldn't process information that quickly. You need to talk slowly & clearly in short sentences. Start rhythms out nice & slow & hold them there until everyone has it locked in.

Sometimes I run into a person that simply can't hold still. They seem to need to bang, or fidget constantly. It's a challenge keeping them focused. Until they experience some sort of entrainment. For purposes of this page, a definition of entrainment is basically when the person's brainwaves get into a pattern of synchronization with an external beat. This helps the brain synchronize internally as well. It can be very therapeutic. A staff member explained this to me.

Getting them to that point of entrainment is most of my goal. Once they are in there, I can almost just sit on the side and jam with them. It almost always takes 5 or 10 minutes to do it. And sometimes it feels like it was an hour. But it was only 5 minutes.

Hula hoops work great with some groups, or a ribbon or scarf so they can get in the center if they want to and wave it around in the breeze as they move or dance around to the beat. You can try giving away little 99 cent store goodies to entice people to hoop in the center for two minutes. It works every time. Just ask them to be mindful of the people around them. I like to keep the center of the drum circle as big as I can without hurting the musical connection from one side to the other.

Laying out the 2 towels in the center so they can feel the beat of the drum rhythms, way into their bodies works great. I don't need to tell people about the healing power of the drum when they try that. They can feel it in their bones. It's very powerful. Try it for yourself if you never have. Lie down on your back in the center of a drum circle and then close your eyes for one minute while everyone is playing a rhythm. It sinks into you deeply. Both are great ideas for almost any drum circle group, and I use them both all the time.



There are so many different developmental disabilities; I can't get too much into it. That's why the input from the staff members is so useful. I have no medical degrees, and I'm not a healer, although sometimes it happens by default. I'm not there to treat them. I'm just there to help them have a little fun. Sometimes I have no idea who has what condition. That's just the way it is. I always learn something new when working with these groups. And just like that, I become a healer by default. They teach me things I never dreamed of, it never ceases to amaze me.

I had to experiment some with ideas, ask the advice of staff, doctors, and others. Here's some of what I've found out and learned. Again, I try to treat them like normal people. The worst thing to do is treat them or talk to them like they are handicapped. Would you like that? I wouldn't. The staff usually tells me if there are any concerns to be aware of. I may need to enunciate a bit more, talk a little clearer and slower but that's about it.

Many of them are very sensitive to pressure. I encourage them to join in when they feel comfortable. That way they can join in with no pressure, on their own. I do have to do a bit more leading and starting out the rhythms. The support beat thing. The comfort of the bottom beat is there for them.

Their attention span, and loud noise are an issue. I deal with this by keeping the volume lower, and by giving them lots of choices of percussion instruments to play. I lay them down right next to them, or on the floor in front of them. Just a pile of goodies to play, and experiment with. They usually end up liking one of them. Most of them don't want you pushing an instrument in their face, to get them to play this, or that particular one. I just smile and with an offering facial expression, lay it down near them. If they like it and want it, they will pick it up when the drum beat gets going. I just need to keep in mind of the volume.

I see shy people become less shy. I see people who play it safe, begin to take risks. I see people who have nothing else in common, becoming deeply connected with one another on a non-verbal level. I know there is something very good going on in these drum circles.



Here are a few ideas and thoughts, on a couple of particular conditions. Again, I'm a musician, not a medical expert. Most of this is from my experiences, and/or the staff advising me over the years.

With attention deficit disorder I usually just put a variety of percussion items by them so they can choose and try out all different kinds of things to keep them busy and occupied. I just give them lots of choices and let them pick. It almost always works, it just creates more of a mess to clean up. Who cares? Part of the job. Keep the volume down.

Many I see with Cerebral Palsy are in wheel chairs, but, other than that, they can function just fine. I have a couple of good friends with this condition so I know a little bit about it from experience drumming with them. They told me the drums they preferred. It was Bongos, because the weak hand doesn't have to work so hard, they can just tap with it, until they strengthen it up a little more. They can set them on their lap, or a chair or table in front of them. It's important to remember that most of these people with many of these various conditions, are highly intelligent, still very functional, and can be very musical human beings. The ones I have become closer friends with tell me they just want to be treated as regular people. When that happens, it's easier for them to open up socially, even in a public setting, such as a public drum circle. Sometimes it takes a few weeks, don't expect to see vast improvement in one drum circle. Overcoming the stigma from the general public is usually the problem, not them.

The lighter weight polymer shell Djembes and Bongos with synthetic heads work the best. Anything like those big 15 pound Bongos get a bit heavy just sitting on your legs for long periods of time. Even for one friend I have who has no feeling in his legs. He has somewhat limited movement in one hand. But he loves playing the Bongos, and plays them quite well now. I'm so impressed how he has improved in motor function, finger movements, and musically. He went from just sort of flopping his hands down to keeping good time, and playing entire rhythms perfectly in about six months.

Frame drums and tambourines work real well for some people also. Especially if they have only the ability to just tap their fingers a little. They can lay it on their lap, and tap away, and be an important part of the group.

Just part of the gang.

I'm no expert, and I have no medical degree as a music therapist, but I have worked with a lot of people with Down Syndrome before. Apparently the distinction is, drumming therapy: you need a degree to do that. Therapeutic drumming: no degree needed. I've seen a few music therapists who didn't seem to establish a good rapport with people and they weren't very empathetic or intuitive with their patients. On the other hand, I have also seen some beginner drum circle facilitators who are born with the gift of intuition and people skills, who leave a session with each individual feeling a sense of real accomplishment.

Usually with Down Syndrome they are open & enthusiastic. That's all you really need. It doesn't hurt to have a few of the percussion toys around them, so they have some choices. While some of them will be able to follow a simple rhythm, several will not be able to. They want to do their "own thing", and that's okay too. But with children, volume is a serious consideration, before the short attention span. Loud noise can be a real problem, so you have to constantly monitor the volume.





Many drum circles begin with Total Chaos. Man, it happens almost every time at the beginning. It kind of freaked me out, early on, when I started working with special needs groups. I just let it go for 5 minutes if I feel the need to. Then it always comes together. It takes a while to have the confidence that it will happen, because it feels like it never will unless I intervene. But I rarely ever need to. The group feels like they corrected it. And guess what? They did.

I don't try to correct or modify what they are doing even if it is a train wreck. I had to learn to trust myself it would come together. I feel it was a success if all of them are actively participating in some kind of drumming.

No matter how chaotic, offbeat, or bad it may seem to me. And because they corrected it themselves, it has a much stronger empowerment effect.

Sometimes it may seem they may not appear to be enjoying it. You might think you perceive it in someone's face.

Most always all of them are, especially if they're doing it of their own choice. Some like to just sit and take it all in for a little while. Just play on.

I often tell them how great they sound and how well they are doing with lots of smiles. I just don't over do it so it becomes obvious, insincere, or soupy. These groups thrive on approval, appreciation, accomplishment, and acceptance. I try to give them lots of positive acknowledgement as we go along.



If I do get a particular person that is so disruptive to the rest of the group, and I have no staff to assist me, I always bring along a small paint set, and offer to let them paint the music for us.

A craft project of some sort is another good idea. I bring a few of those big vitamin bottles and ask them make shakers for me. "I need a couple of shakers made, can you help me make one and decorate it up?" It worked great. Now, the staff saves the empty bottles for me when I come to drum with them. I bring some shaker materials, like popcorn, beads, and macaroni. Colorful things work the best. One time a guy spent the entire hour and a half sorting just the right colors to put in the shaker. It left the group to make some music, yet he was still involved. I had colored tape for him to decorate it up with. When it was done he was so proud of it, he played along with us near the end. Be sure to ask the staff if they can keep it.

Here's another idea, speaking of painting art. Have them do a painting, or create a mural, painting the music. Almost a music appreciation thing, or a "how does music make me feel" painting. I get a big pad of paper, like you might put on an artist's easel. I always bring a few big sheets of paper, sometimes a big artist's pad. We try using different mediums: markers, water colors, crayons, or pastels.

They can either paint their own, or do a group painting. Sometimes I will ask who wants to drum, and who wants to paint the music. Mostly I will get half the group painting a mural, and the other half playing the drums. Then switch it up later, so they all get a turn at both the drumming, and the mural. I ask them to express their feelings in art as they listen to the music. Some get displayed in the facilities to this day.



Sometimes when working with special needs kids, many are scared of noise, I learned from a staff member to get them in there early, and let them explore the drums a little on their own. (And the percussion items.) In many cases, when they're in charge of the noise, they're happy to make it loud. I sometimes have a dancing rhythm going when they enter the room, and do the egg shaker on each chair thing.

We play a rhythm together and they can move around or whatever. It gives them a sense of making music before the drumming starts. For the first time with a group, I don't expect much of a groove, but be ready for it, because it happens if you anchor it for them with a nice support rhythm. It is important to have stuff that can be played with one hand. I have this basket of fruit shaped shakers I use a lot with them. Expect to spend a little time finding the right instrument for each person, and let them choose something different later on. Make it fun, and interesting for them.

Some have physical limitations, so I bring buffalo drums, frame drums, drums they can lay on their laps and play. I try to avoid things played with sticks or mallets, because some will just start bashing them wildly, disrupting the rhythm of everyone else, and possibly put one through a drum head or someone else's head. I keep them stashed away and use them sparingly. I bring a few Djembe stands or taller drums to accommodate those who might need one. Even those who you may think can only bash away, will get the repetition of a drum rhythm, and catch on eventually. It's a good idea to have some soft beaters for those who can't use their hands very well.

Make sure that your kit is safe. No sharp edge drums like on some Darbukas. Think of your players as vulnerable children with the size and power of adults. Avoid taking anything fragile. The first drum circle with a special

needs group can be very challenging. Expect some total chaos to happen. It gets a lot easier the second time. In my experience some of these people have problems judging how hard to strike a body drum, and could hurt their hands by playing it too hard. Show them a few pointers on good hand technique after the warm up jam.



As I said, loud noise is my biggest concern. The healthy noise limit is about 85 decibels (Db.) I think that's the legal safety limit as well. That's what the cop said when he broke up a public drum circle in a park. (This wasn't a special needs group.) He had his little decibel meter, and showed me the reading on it. We were up in the 120 Db. range. The neighbors called them on us. Actually, he was pretty cool about it. As a radio operator I'm familiar with decibels of gain, etc. but I researched this a little, and here's what I found. A normal conversation is about 60 Db, up to the threshold of discomfort, that is the 120 Db range.

A bunch of people drumming together indoors can easily reach into the 115 to 120 Db range. About 150 Db, is the pain threshold. You can get a decibel meter relatively inexpensively. I think Maplin makes one. Keeping the volume level down takes some skill, and experience to pull it off. But it is possible. And this is even more important when dealing with special needs people.

Create a volume down signal, or just start to play your drum quieter, more often than not, they will be there right with you. It works just great. And as an added bonus, the participants get to hear each other. But if you use it too much it can have a negative effect. It's something to keep in mind, some of the beginners get way into it, and are often getting their issues out.

Here's some advice from a friend of mine. When he does big gigs with 100 people, the Db level can be huge. So he brings enough cheap foam earplugs to go around. As far as I know, if you warn them, and offer them protection, you've done your job. I get them at Wallyworld, and keep a few dozen of them in my gig bag.





A few final thoughts. This new atmosphere of spontaneous drumming can be overwhelming to some people. The one thing I don't want to do is have people feel threatened, scared, overwhelmed, or lost. Trying to do complicated rhythms can do that. Lots of positive comments from you during the drum circle helps a lot. "Hey, we sounded great on that one didn't we?" Smile a lot, thumbs up! If they are there, they are participating. Starting some spontaneous applause after a jam goes a long way.

A few things I bring besides my earplugs in my gig bag, are some padded tape, first aid, hand creams, anti-bacterial wipes, etc. for anyone who just might ask. It's also a good idea to familiarize yourself with epilepsy, in case someone has a seizure. It's the staff's responsibility, but you should know what's going on. It's nice if you can speak with the staff beforehand about any possible issues, but as I mentioned, that's not always possible. So I need to be ready for anything.



Remember to try and speak with the staff afterwards for some feedback. And at the next time you are there. (Hopefully) Or, leave them a feedback form to fill out, with a self addressed envelope and a stamp on it. I gathered a lot of useful information with a simple feedback form. The medical staff knows a lot more than I do about medical conditions.

**Remember that there are heavy restrictions on photography in most cases, so be sure to ask if you want to take photos. If it's a event out in public, with the general public invited - then it's different.**

**If the group takes a break for lemonade or snacks, make sure they don't come back to the drumming area before they are all finished. Goatskin drum heads still make terrible tables and coasters.**

**One thing some don't understand about drum circles, is that it's more about the people, than it is the drumming. Many facilitators agree with me on this, some don't. The quality of the music produced in a drum circle isn't really based on the musical experience of the players, but on the developing quality of the relationships of the people that emerge. As a facilitator I help people to empower themselves through drumming, music, and fun. They need no experience at all to play in a drum circle. I encourage individual creativity, & group dynamics.**



**Ultimately, I just let people play. We drum up some fun. Let your personality out, and with your calm and reassuring manner, watch the volume, and they will quickly enjoy playing together, and connecting with you.**

**I recently had the opportunity to facilitate a series of drum circles for groups of children at a K – 9 school in Florissant a few years ago, I did a drum circle day for the school with another music teacher at Ackerman Music Dept."**

**The way they wanted it structured was like this: First, a drum circle for the teachers, and faculty at 8:20. Then one after another, 5 different groups of kids, 2 classes each, about 30 to 50 in each group, (The perfect amount, actually.) We had about 50 minutes with each group, one coming in pretty much right after the other. We went with the 2 concentric circles of chairs set up, with two yard wide entrances leading in.**

**The drum circles were held in the gym, not the most ideal place for drum circles, but if you find the spot with the least echo, it's not too bad. I use the clap my hands loud test as soon as I enter the gym before setting up. I can find the sweet place with the least echo that way. Often, I can't see it in advance, and usually it's at the far end of the basketball court, centered, starting about 10 yards from the wall. So I asked that they set the chairs up there.**

**We set the circle about 20 feet across, so one side can hear the other, and you don't get that disconnect, but still leaving room for self expression in the center. As we find our group dynamic, the hula hoops, and colorful scarves come out. I do move around the interior of the circle slowly a few times as I'm verbalizing the beginning of a rhythm, not making eye contact, as not to pressure them, but letting each of them see my hands up close so they can then figure out how they want to play. I do this for maybe 4 – 12 measures and play along as I verbalize it. Playing it nice and slow until we are getting that rhythm to lock in, and then I go back to my chair and fade out, or hold it steady, until it's time to rumble end it, and move on to a new rhythm. I would do 2 rhythms, my partner would do 2, and we would**

take turns holding the downbeat steady for each other. It worked out great, because the kids could either play the support beat, and/or improvise. They could explore their drums during that 50 minutes, and find it's unique different sounds and nuances.

There just isn't enough time with each group to use up swapping instruments, or drum circle games, pie slices, or any of that. Just play baby. If there's another drum circle day, we can get into other things, but for today we just make music.

I think it's important to have a variety of drums representing different countries and cultures, as well as play rhythms from the kids. So we have congas, various doumbeks and djembes, some light bongos, and frame drums, plus a few things for those in wheelchairs, and/or with physical limitations so that they can still have fun and be a part of it. With a few exceptions, most of my kit is a wide variety of used drums I've bought over the years, most purchased one at a time.

Anyway, at the start, we positioned ourselves against the far side wall seats so we can see everything that's going on, and who's coming into the room as things are happening. Often times with multiple drum circles like this some come in late. A few kids, or a group will need to be transitioned in, sometimes during an ongoing rhythm. But more importantly, I position there so the bass note resonates more. It helps the kids (and adults) to easily hear, and feel the downbeat, and if they need it, that anchor is there to take any early pressure off them.

I like to make it a visually appealing sight when the kids enter the playing area, so I decorate it up a bit beforehand. It takes me longer, but it makes a difference if you have the time. The drums are colorful and inviting by themselves, but I have this huge 20 foot across and 8 foot tall pastel tapestry from India that has this amazing hand stitched embroidery all across the top foot of it. It's some sort of silk mix fabric, and it drapes so beautifully. It sets a real nice mood, and a tone that this is going to be a fun experience. Maybe I've watched too much "Project Runway" with my wife, and some of it rubbed off on me. It does look like it came from "Mood". Actually it was a yard sale treasure that I found a few years ago. It makes a beautiful colorful backdrop hanging up on the wall behind the drum circle, and just says, this is going to be fun.

So, we had one drum circle for the faculty, and then 5 drum circles after that. Very often with this type of thing, the groups are scheduled 5 – 10 minutes apart. Just barely enough time to re-set the chairs and drums, get a few sips of water, take a few breaths, and in comes the next group, it's go time. Our strategy going in was to pre-set the drums in front of, or on top of each chair, have them single file in, get them all seated, play now, and talk later. We only had a limited amount of time (50 minutes) with each group, and we wanted them to have as much playing, fun, and self discovery time as possible.

The plan was a tried and true method. Get them quickly seated with a drum they like, and get a warm up jam going for 5 minutes or so, and end it with a big rumble. Usually it's a basic rhythm like Boom sha la-ka, Boom sha la-ka, & etc. Or, the "We Will We Will Rock You", Boom Boom tone or, a default drum circle rhythm: Boom Boom tone tone (rest) A lot of it depended on the vibe we got as they were getting seated.

The music therapist and I had never worked together before, so there was a little concern in the back of my mind. As luck would have it, our skill sets meshed together beautifully. Both of us prefer the organic approach to facilitating drum circles. In other words, the better the music sounds, the more fun it is, and the better it feels. No games, no waiting for the other side to play and then get a turn, none of that. Just get them playing a warm up rhythm quickly so the nerves, and the "what if's" fade away. Then it's easy to move on to the more interesting world rhythms.

With our first group, the faculty, we knew they all had a full day of teaching ahead of them and had to get them having fun quickly, so that's what we did. But at the same time we wanted them to experience a shortened version of our curriculum.

Quick 15 second demonstration: Bass note is the elephant. Right and left hand tone are tiger, and the lion. After a Latin-ish warm up rhythm, we got into a Native American Heartbeat rhythm. They got such a good groove going on that, we went to a funky sort of Fanga, and then wrapped it up with belly dance Beledi. By then, they were pretty jazzed. We got a lot of fun packed into that 25 minutes. Rumbled and wrapped it, they left, and in came the first group of children.

Here was the breakdown for the day:

#### Schedule and Type of Groups

##### 8:20-8:45: Staff Warm-Up Drum Circle

9:15: 26 Students + approximately 20 staff. The info given was that most of these students had Autism, and were lower functioning. The grade range: K-8. We were informed that a few would be able to follow start and stop directions, but most would have trouble sustaining attention and following directions. Most of the students were non-verbal. There was a lot of sensory issues with this group, including a few students who did not tolerate loud noise well.

So, we kept the volume down, and slow and steady. All the kids got into it really nicely. That warm up rhythm really sets the tone. Is this going to be a classroom type thing? Or, is this going to be fun? The music gave direction, they sensed and felt where the endings were, it was a breeze. The nice thing about verbalizing a rhythm is it can be processed faster. If I say, "Yum Yum, Tastes Like Chick-en" (2 bass notes, the rest tones.) I say it slowly maybe four times and play while I say it. Then drop the vocals and let it jam, possibly bring



up the tempo if it's sounding good. With Heartbeat, some of them fall of count and it goes into a Row Row Row Your Boat kind of jam, it still works, and they usually find their way back on time.

10:15: 27 students + approximately 17 staff. This was the lowest functioning group with 18 of the students in a wheelchair. Info given was that most of these students are mainly working on making wants and needs known. All are non-verbal, and loud noise may be disturbing to some.

Again, low volume. Kept the rhythms mostly soulful, spiritual, and grooving. They all found their places in it. With groups such as this during the warm up I start it very slow and steady, and keep it there for a few minutes longer until the groove was established.

I write about this in more detail below, but a neurologist friend of mine explained to me that despite many of their individual challenges, that most kids like this are highly functioning individuals. They just live a few seconds in the past. So, a drum circle rhythm, even unfamiliar to them, being repeated over and over works perfectly.

So, when they are ready, they will begin to play and fall right into the groove. For that reason when the staff asked a few questions in advance, I asked them not to intervene if someone is not participating. They will when they are ready, and when they feel comfortable. "Not all who wander, are really lost", is the case sometimes also.

With each of the groups, during those first crucial minutes of the warm up jam I say to the kids, "Play whenever you feel like you want to, okay? Play whatever you want, just follow the beat." (Everybody usually chuckles.) The point is to get them out of their heads, overthinking, and just experiment and explore their drum, and the sounds it can make."

11:15 Lunch – Thanks I'm starving at this point.

12:15: 28 students + approximately 13 staff. This was a mixed diagnosis group of slightly higher functioning, more verbal students with Autism, Intellectual Disability and Emotional Disturbance. There was one student in a wheelchair.

Despite some of the challenges, it was apparent that with each group after about 10 minutes they started to "get it" and get out of their heads. Then they could just play and have fun with it. It was the perfect example of self discovery teaching without actually teaching. The Yum Yum, Tastes Like Chicken rhythm, the I Like to Eat Chocolate Cake jam, Heartbeat, Fanga, and Beledi all seemed to go great with all the groups, we got the energy up, and we got them improvising, and sounding pretty good. The main thing was, they were making music, and having fun. With all these groups, 50 minutes went by like it was 15.

1:15: 21 students + approximately 9 staff. This was a mixed group of students with Autism, Emotional Disturbance, Other Health Impairment or Intellectual Disability. They were verbal and higher functioning than the previous group.

Everything was working nicely, so we stuck with the basic curriculum. I keep a 36" long back polymer steamer trunk filled with curious percussion items. (It's shown in the thumbnail pic on the video.) I call it the drum circle treasure chest. I keep the lid open and have it off to the side. It has a large inviting "Drum Circle" sign on it, and it has nothing that is played with sticks. Lots of colorful fun things, maracas, shakers, tambourines, guiros, and so on. Somehow a stick always finds its way to a goatskin drumhead. These kids were all well behaved, but I have done events like this before and the treasure chest is there just in case.

2:15: 30 students + 12 staff. This was the highest functioning group of students with mostly an Emotional Disturbance, a few with Other Health Impairment or Autism. These students were verbal and are right at or slightly below grade level. This group went last so we could have more flexibility to go an hour or more.

And so we did. These kids took to jamming and improvising right away, and had a great time, especially playing Beledi near the end. A few of the teachers got on the hula hoops, got in the center and hooped it up. It was a beautiful thing connecting to the music like that. And it happened with each group.

3:15: Pack it up. Wait for the school buses to clear so we could load up all the drums, and haul them back home.

We were very busy, but throughout the day with each group I could see their eyes light up, and the smiles come out as we played the various rhythms. With these kinds of all day drum circles you have to pace yourself so you have enough left for the last group. They deserve as much energy as the first group got.

We were both pretty worn out, but at the same time it was so gratifying knowing we are doing some good in our community, healing, inspiring to improvise, and building the self confidence in these kids, all the while having fun.

I hope some of my writing and experiences gives you a few ideas working with special needs individuals & groups, young or adult. Please keep in mind that these are just my opinions, and based on my experiences. If you would like to read some more about my approach to drum circles, please consider picking up my book, "A Practical Guide To Hand Drumming And Drum Circles" It's 300 pages, and \$8 on Amazon Kindle or Nook.

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In Memory of my best friend, drummer and musician Jim Tonak

[Photos & Memories of Jim Tonak aka Cheeseadiddle](#)

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I hope you enjoyed reading my page, and if you facilitate drum circles, some of my methods and writing helps you.

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The proceeds from the sales of my drumming CD's, DVD's, and drum circle book helps me to do this kind of work in our community, and keep the website going. I try to provide them at as reasonable a cost as possible. As an independent artist, money is tight, so I always appreciate a product that is a good value for the cost. That's the idea behind my book, CD's and DVD.

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There is increasing recognition of the health benefits of music therapy, particularly facilitated hand drumming. Below I offer my drum circle book, 101 rhythms DVD, and drum circle jam music for sale. Unfortunately, places where the people who benefit from what I do the most, have very limited budgets. I've never recieved any grants, assistance, or funding, and I don't endorse drum companies.

If you would be willing to make a purchase of any amount to help me continue to provide therapeutic music to groups in St. Louis, it would help out a little. Please click on the purchase links below. Thanks in advance if you can pitch in a little. My book & DVD are solid if you are facilitating drum circles, or thinking about starting one up for your area, or group.

My 101 Drum Circle Rhythms video on Amazon. Over 2 hours of them. The full download to 2 devices is \$8. Here's the link, or search on the title. 101 Drum Circle Rhythms (The DVD disc is a few bucks more.)

[101 Drum Circle Rhythms Download Link](#)

My 300 page drum circle book: "A Practical Guide Hand Drumming and Drum Circles" is also \$8.

[Drum Circle Book On Amazon Kindle](#)

CdBaby link (Digital drum circle jam music) - They have "Wild Drum Circles" (Not on iTunes yet)

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